

This is the story of my pupil who became my teacher, which I am more fit to tell...

(Angus's voice)

most headstrong pupil, Susan Duff,

...once when I did great harm and once when great harm was done to me and mine.

in the three-voice device were used, Ninian-Angeline-Warren cd become 1st-person narrators in the flashbacks, such as "Gospel" and "Soldiers"

combined voices of Ninian, Angeline, Warren:

the meld of our voices...

Ninian's has gone into the ground...A's into the air, in song...W's was  
the voice of command...

This is the story of our offspring, and the linger of our actions...

A. abt Monty in arena, "Angel Momma shd see me now"... He had that right.

I did not raise my only son to...

...homesteader, washerwoman, owner of half a county

We were at odds in life, and it takes the <sup>meld</sup>medicine of time to resolve us  
into a singleness of voice...

<sup>in, way generations do,</sup>  
We disapproved, and in our way loved them even so

This is the story of our offspring, we three who were at odds in that  
endless country called the past,

Ninian, Angeline and Warren

A story wants to be told in a certain way, or it is merely the alphabet  
badly recited. The words borrow us, so to speak, and while our three  
existences now voice  
voices have become a single (one) lodged in the land of this story--the  
harp of bone through which the wind-struck music must come, a poet of this  
time has put it--we...

And so this is the story of our offspring, which we are more fit to tell  
now than when I was alive.

## Susan's Room

1924

This is the story of my headstrong daughter, Susan Duff, which I am more fit to tell now than when I was alive.

"*The evening brings all home,*" the last ringleted girl had finished off the old ballad on a hopeful note--she would have given her ears for a praising word from Susan--and night and quiet had come again to the house on Highland Street where I had died six years previous. The place was much the same and so were the hoping girls, but Susan's method of things was of a far different order than when Flora and I miserably sheltered here with her in the last months left to the pair us in the influenza

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year of 1918. Regular as the curtain of nightfall was Susan's routine in closing away her teaching day now. Shoulders back, her tall frame straightened, even though there was no one in the house to meet for the evening but herself, she performed a brisk tally of the hours of lessons in the account book she kept handy atop the piano, then the balky old doors of the music parlor were slid shut. Next a quick stop in the hallway bath to freshen her face with a rinse of cold water; an adjusting glance into the mirror, that pool of candor for those of us who bear the Duff name and face; hairpins taken out, and her chestnut hair shaken down. Onward to her stovetop supper, which she raced through as though still making up for what she regarded as my interminable graces over expiring food. Now, with a pat to the kitchen and a cursory locking of doors and windows, she was ready to ascend.

As fixed as a star, the telltale glow of her gable window appeared over Helena at the last of dusk and burned on past respectable bedtime. You might think a woman of her early climb in life, singled out by our God for a soaring voice to lift His hymns and then casting away choir song for the anthems of a harsh young century, would find it a hard comedown to be faced with a nightly audience of only herself. You'd be as wrong as you could be, Susan would have

you know. The hours beyond dark she counted as her own, free and clear of beginner lessons and quavery approximations of high C.

This night, however, no sooner was she upstairs than she whipped to a halt in front of the alcove of window, her gaze drawn down the hillside to the state capitol dome, resting as it did on the center of the government of Montana like a giant's copper helmet. The dome still was alight with the festoon of bulbs that had brought in 1924, four months ago, which seemed to her uncalled for.

"Blaze," Susan addressed the civic constellation in our good solid Fifeshire burr she was born to, "see if I care."

She gave a throaty chuckle at herself and wended her way toward her desk. The attic-like room extended the full length of the house--loft quarters for a married pair of servants, this must have originally been--and Susan used the expanse like a rambler cottage perched above the formal quarters of downstairs. The rolltop desk, a divan, a phonograph, what had been my Morris chair and footstool, onyx-topped sidetables, a blue-and-black knitted comforter on the sill seat of the strategically aimed gable window, sets of bookshelves, a spinet piano, our family Bible on a reading stand of its own, all populated what was in actual fact her bedroom.

This mob of comforts drew her up out of public day as if lifting her into a lifeboat, and Susan tallied the necessity of this each time, too. Liberal with the night, inventive as she probably ever was going to be in her fortieth year under heaven, she believed she was most herself any more in these private hours, this room where the minute hand did not count. The time of footlights and the song-led marches for the right of women to vote were forever tucked into the past, she knew, and as to the tongues of the town down there beyond the base of the stairs, she could do nothing about those. But up here, she got busy at life's amended version of Susan Duff. There were encouraging letters to be written to favorite former pupils. (Tonight's, which took lip-biting concentration, to the breathy young soprano whose recent *lieder* recital in Milwaukee had not found favor there.) The afternoon's newspapers to be devoured, the *Herald* for spite and the *Independent* for sustenance. Books in plenitude; at this point she was determinedly attempting the novels of D.H. Lawrence. Music, of course; the phonograph sang perfectly on command, restorative in itself to a teacher of voice. And she still was secretary of the Montana chapter of the Flanders Field Remembrance Alliance, which took her to a drafty meeting hall once a month and obliged her to see to official correspondence in between. Tonight, as always, she

shifted scene every so often, her tall solo figure suddenly on the move as if she were a living chess piece. Time did not lag here in her industrious garret, it was not allowed to.

When it was nearing midnight and she had just begun to salt away another day between diary covers, she faintly heard the turn of a key in the front door and then the rhythm of him coming up the stairs to her for the first time in four years.

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"Susan? You might have changed the lock."

He arrived on the wings of that commanding smile. *The very model of a modern genteel Major*, a line of hers teased somewhere back in that diary.

Behind Wes, men would have charged Hell; in fact, men had. Even his way of standing, the weight taken there on his left leg to spare the right knee peppered by shrapnel at St. Mihiel, proclaimed the reliance that the world had wanted to place on him. Brave and wounded at the same time: the story of Wesley Williamson's life, as Susan was plentifully aware, on more than one kind of battlefield.

Voice training had its benefits. Surprised no end to be confronting him again after all this time, she sounded in possession of herself--or at least within

her own custody--as she spoke back to him, tailored as a duke there at the top of her stairs:

“Evidently I saved you some shinnying, by not.”

“Oh oh,” Wes said, his smile dented but still there, “I guess I’ve been told.” He picked his way through the long room, interested as a museum-goer, to the perch nearest her, which happened to be the edge of her bed. “May I?”

Wes and his Williamson manners. Walk uninvited into a woman’s bedroom, then be solicitous about seating himself too near her. All the fury that Susan had told herself a thousand times she had put away for good flooded up in her. This time her words would have cut through bone:

“Sit yourself down, Wes, please do. I haven’t had a good look at a family man in a while.”

Wes ducked his head slightly in acknowledgment. His glance lit on the open pages in front of her and the pen she had just put down.

“A woman armed with a diary. Not the best company for me to be keeping, I suppose.”

Susan simply looked at him across the small white field of paper. When you have cost a man a governorship, what further scandal does he think you are apt to inflict on him?

The silence stretched. At last Wes said:

"You know I couldn't."

"I know you *wouldn't*," she said as if correcting his spelling. They had been through this and through this. A proven hero who could not or would not undergo a tug-of-war with his church. "*Wes, the Pope has no need of the divorce law. But you do.*" Who had broken his vows six ways from Sunday in half the countries of Europe and in this very room and then would not break his marriage. "*She's not well, Susan. I can't face leaving her, it's against everything in me.*"

She couldn't resist asking:

"How is the tender Merrinell?"

For a start, Merrinell Williamson at that moment believed her husband was in Minneapolis buying grain consignments. "She is...holding her own. At Lake George, with the tykes. Easter break. Although they aren't tykes any more. Comanches, more like." Wes cocked his head and regarded Susan. "How is the Lord's gift to the musically inclined?"

"Enough how's, don't you think? This isn't like you, Wes. Remember?

When we stopped seeing each other--"

"--When you dropped me like a bushel of hot peppers--"

"--When we were this close to being the flavor on every gossip's tongue in Montana and I said I'd have no more of it if I couldn't have you, we agreed that was that. You're not doing either of us any good by walking in here in the middle of the night. If I remember, you were quite concerned with 'appearances.'"

Wes waved that off. "No one much is up at this hour. I had Monty leave me off at the capitol grounds and came up around the back blocks. Here, come see the new Doozy." He was onto his feet and over to the gable.

In spite of herself his vitality and her curiosity drew her over to the window by him. In the streetlights and diffused glow of the strings of bulbs on the dome, the Dusenburg could be seen. Wes's Negro chauffeur, Monty, was caressing the hood of the automobile with a polishing rag. The lanky form leaned into the already burnished surface as if magnetized to the machine. "Monty would sleep in it if I'd let him," Wes was saying.

Susan had turned her head to study him, seeing in the famous lines of his face the contours of the young Wes Williamson we first laid eyes on. Back there,

Susan is twelve and snippy and inespearable from me, particularly on trips to town, and she and I are at the stockyards in Valier to settle up with the railroad agent on the shipping of our lambs. Commotion bawls out over the prairie from the loading pens. "Ninian!" I hear, from a Double W cowboy named Dolph Kuhn with whom I had contended over grazing boundaries for practically forever.

"Come to see what real livestock looks like?"

(to come: Susan and Ninian go over to the loading pens to watch. The Williamson entourage is there: young Wendell of the Double WW, young Wes of the Deuce W, maybe their father Warren. Physical description of Wes.)

The cattle are being chuted into railroad cars: a dog aggravates at their heels, the gabardined stockbuyer slaps the corral boards with a tasselled whip thin as a wand. The herd of brown-red backs is wound tight against an end of the corral, a rivulet of steers bangs up the high-walled ramp into the stock car. This heavy shoving pattern of livestock sums up the Williamsons, I think to myself.

Owners of the Double W ranch in the next valley over from ours and the Deuce W ranch in the Highwood Mountains 00 miles east, the two sets of Williamsons were like princelings out of Shakespeare--Susan no doubt had something apt in

her school vocabulary of poetry. Watching the cow dogs at work, I had only a spiteful scrap--*the long dogs of the lairds/that drag down deer.*

A story wants to be told a certain way, or it is merely the alphabet badly recited. The words borrow us, so to speak, and while mine is the voice lodged in the land of this story--the harp of bone through which the wind-struck music must come, to keep to the poetry--you may notice a sharpness in me around the Williamsons. In the long course of our push against each other, homesteaders against barons of cattle, I once gave great grief and I once was given great grief. For now let me just say Wes was always the best of that bunch, and had his own hard row to hoe there. The time would soon enough come, beyond that Valier day, when he had to be the Williamson clan's soldier as well as its businessman--its breveted major in the AEF as well as its captain of enterprise. His half-brother Wendell, with a cattle empire to run, had it easier. All Susan and I were seeing that day, really, were the Williamsons going about their business of owning everything they could get their hands on.

Wes turned from the window, a complicit smile still on him. Susan created a little more distance between them. She did wonder why she hadn't changed that door lock.

He surveyed the room's furnishings again. "I'm glad I wasn't the one to heft all this up those stairs. Susan, you know what I think?"

"I'm pretty sure I'm about to find out."

"You're treed, up here. No, let me finish. You've treed yourself. Chased the Susan ~~Duff~~ that was right up into this upholstered perch." He walked back the length of the room to seat himself on the edge of the bed again, letting drop a phrase at a time as he came. "I see habits. I see pastimes. I don't see you taking the world on as you always did." Wes looked levelly at her. "It's a waste of a good woman."

"It's late, is what it is," she said, checking the clock. "Wes, really-- please have your say and take yourself home."

"I have a pupil for you."

"I don't lack for pupils, they're coming out my ears." Which was not as true as it once would have been.

"This one, I would like you to devote all your time to, for a while. However long it takes. I'll pay double for everything--your hours, whatever you need to buy in the way of music or, what is it, accompaniment."

"I have never wanted your--"

“Susan, there’s no charity to this. You’ll earn your keep with this pupil, don’t worry about that. It’s a voice I’d say is ...unformed. Opera, vaudeville, I don’t know what we’re talking, with this. That’ll be for you to decide. Oh, and we’ll need to do this at the ranch, not here. We can’t--well, you’ll see... Your old place--could you stay there? I want you to do everything for this pupil. The works.”

“Wes?” Honest bewilderment came out in her voice. “Wes, who in this world means that much to you?”

He appeared stunned at how she’d put it. Sitting there glazed, pale as porcelain. When he at last rose from the bed edge, was it her imagination or did he lurch more than a tricky knee would account for? Susan watched him navigate the length of the room, biting her tongue against calling out to him. She figured he would march down her stairs and out of her carefully compartmented existence (*Treed!*) and that would be the natural end of it.

But he paused at the gable window and stood there facing out into the night. Over his shoulder he told her: “Monty.”

## Susan's Room

1924

This is the story of my headstrong daughter, Susan Duff, which I am more fit to tell now than when I was alive.

The telling is not purely me, you understand. [I myself am not much in this, except once when I gave great grief and once when I received great grief.] But a story wants to be told a certain way, or it is merely the alphabet badly recited. The words borrow us, so to speak. <sup>So</sup> I would imagine that mine is the voice <sup>here</sup> chosen for this <sup>of the</sup> because, while I may have been a bit judgmental in life, now that I am safely a memory it is my generosity with words that exists on and on in people. True, my taste for <sup>companionship</sup> outright poetry never ran beyond the swatches of Burns that my wife Flora and our

neighbor Angus McCaskill would trade by the ream. But Angus among us lived long enough to quote the poet who would write of "the wind-struck music man's bones were moulded to be the harp for," and in this as much else I take my cue from that tuneful man Angus. Consider me the bone harp chosen to pick out of the unquiet air of time the story of my Susan and the two others.

"*The evening brings all home,*" the last ringleted girl had finished off the old ballad on a hopeful note--she would have given her ears for a praising word from Susan--and night and quiet had come again to the house on Highland Street where I had died five years previous. The place was much the same and so were the hoping girls, but Susan's method of things was of a far different order than when Flora and I <sup>minutely</sup> sheltered here with her in the last months left to <sup>a pair of</sup> us in 1919. Regular as the curtain of nightfall now was Susan's routine in closing away her teaching day. Shoulders back, her tall frame straightened, even though there was no one in the house to meet for the evening but herself, she performed a brisk tally of the hours of lessons in the account book she kept handy atop the piano, then the balky old doors of the music parlor were slid shut. Next a quick stop in the hallway bath to freshen her face with a rinse of cold water; an adjusting glance into the mirror, that pool of candor for those of us who bear

. conf. 4th of 1918

There is this, too. Without me the story is not there, although I am not much in it, except once when I gave great grief and once when I received great grief....And so it is my tone, my turn of words, that this story says it wants....A story is like the wind, it begins in a whisper of breath and runs like a river in the sky. It rises and falls... no doing of my own, except to set foot aboard an America ship... my manner of letting words knit along in a certain way

Perhaps think of me as the bone harp chosen to pick out of the unquiet air of time the story of my Susan and the two others.

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Any of those who preceded me into the soil of the English Creek valley, I spoke over them all, at their last six-foot journey, and my voice no doubt lodged into that land on those occasions. Through me, also, children of our homesteads carried on their tongues the vocabularies of the South Fork schoolhouse I brought into being and watched over like the keeper of sheep that I was. ("Ninian," our schoolmaster Angus McCaskill would intone when I would rehire him year after year at the same wage, "if only your rich sentiments about learning would visit your wallet sometime.") The story, then, is

one poet said...  
Or simply: voice that  
the story says it wants  
from poet

sub-off poet

not so much mine as *of* mine. Of one I fathered, of one I caused great grief to, and of one I received great grief from.

Perhaps think of me as the bone harp chosen to pick out of the restless air of time the story of my Susan and the two others.